

Aristotle's Account of Eudemonia and the Defence of Altruism

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Abstract: Aristotle's Theory of Eudemonia is based on a profound perception of humanity. This theory is consistently practical for ordinary people, albeit in discussions about happiness and its components or explanations of varying lifestyles. Aristotle's conception can be used to achieve a realistic 'the best life', which largely contrasts other eudemonic theories that can only realistically be applied by philosophical or divine individuals. In this essay, it will be argued that self-interest and other concerning factors exist with Aristotle's theory, even though Aristotle himself never refuted the claim that his theory is profoundly egoistic. The self-interested aspect of Aristotelian theory is only relevant to how individuals perceive humans in general. Nonetheless, other concerns (such as how individuals treat others and the outcomes of their actions) are legitimate. Aristotle's most significant achievement in this field was his promotion of virtue as a means of resolving any potential conflict between individuals' personal interests and the outside world.

Keywords: altruism, egoism, eudemonia, happiness

1. Introduction

Happiness refers to a pleasurable and stable psychological state experienced by individuals after their needs and desires have been fulfilled. On the whole, people tend to associate happiness with life experiences. According to Aristotle (1095b 15–16) [1], a majority of individuals (including most demotic types of people) appear to view pleasure as happiness or "the good" based on their experiences in life. Ancient philosophers (i.e., Aristippus) argue that feelings guide individuals to carry out moral behaviour. Thus, the value of virtue may be found in the provision of sensory pleasure. On the other hand, it serves no purpose [2]. Nonetheless, Aristotle argues that, under Aristippus' view, happiness stimulates the out-of-control expression of human desire, which inevitably destroys social norms and legal provisions (1095b 15–16) [1]. Additionally, he rejected Socratic descriptions that solely associate happiness with the pursuit of genuine knowledge, claiming that such a life is exclusive to godlike beings and does not apply to humans.

Nonetheless, it seems that Aristotle has strived to define what happiness means for social beings. It is a form of good that individuals can obtain and exercise (1096b 33–34) [1]. As a concept, happiness involves intelligence and material possessions (such as money and health). Based on these factors, the extent to which Aristotle's concept of happiness can be consistently applied to every ordinary individual will be investigated in this work. In contrast to other eudemonic theories (most of which can only be used by philosophical or elite individuals), Aristotle's vision can help to develop

a realistic form of “best existence.” Some researchers have argued that his theory is radically egoistic. However, in this work, it will be contended that the theory is only self-interested in its understanding of the human being. On the other hand, the ways in which individuals treat others (and the relevant outcomes of these actions) are genuine.

In order to support, defend or justify Aristotle’s altruism, a basic definition of happiness and its components will be presented first. This definition is based on the explanation put forward in the book *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the final section of this essay, the extent to which Aristotle’s account is egoistic will be examined.

2. Happiness: Living Well and Doing Well

Every action or decision is intended to cause some good, according to Aristotle (1094a 1-2) [1]. Thus, it can be implied that individuals do things for the purpose of achieving something good. Similar to success, happiness is a goal or lifestyle that people yearn for and strive to achieve by making significant efforts to be prosperous, likeable, and successful in their relationships. Aristotle developed a hierarchy of outcomes, in which happiness is placed at the top, meaning that the pursuit of happiness is the primary reason for which people do things. Thus, happiness can be considered a goal of human existence and the highest form of goodness (This study will not discuss the definition of “good” and its components at this point).

The distinctiveness of human activities served as the starting point for Aristotle’s discussion on happiness. This is because humans provide a distinctive purpose. Thus, if a person’s existence fails to satisfy this role, it will be relatively flawed and lacking, analogous to the unmet function of animal life [3]. It displays the human capacity for reasoning and decision-making. Thus, it is clear that seeking happiness is a rational practice.

Nonetheless, the most significant issue with Aristotle’s justification of human functions is that humans cannot be classified using a functional term. Everything has its own purpose. For instance, a bottle opener must serve the purpose of opening bottles. Likewise, people may feed or employ animals for certain purposes, but this can simply mean that humans have evolved to a greater extent than other species and not that they serve a special purpose for carrying out such behaviours.

Although the distinctive purpose of humans indicates that a fulfilled human life must refer to this differentiation, the objection seems so strong that it cannot be disproved by other arguments. If someone wants to live a happy life, they should employ their capacity for that reason. It is only possible for them to achieve the most significant level (for example, the level of perfection) and the happiness associated with it by doing this function properly [3]. When describing how to function well, Aristotle identifies a strong relationship between virtue and happiness. He asserts that a person’s individual function is to reasonably exercise their soul, while the eminence of the function highlights the distinctive virtue of the activity in question. Thus, happiness is based on virtue. Moreover, it is only when this virtue is exercised well that a person can say that they have fulfilled one component of happiness (i.e., doing well) [4].

Meanwhile, the second component of happiness is living well (1095a16-17) [1], and lustre is leeched from happiness without this component. There are various factors that demonstrate how happiness is intertwined with external goods and these factors include good health, great friendships, fortune and healthy families. In this respect, it is unreasonable to suggest that happiness can only truly be accomplished when an individual is ‘doing’ or ‘living’ well.

Firstly, it is important to question whether an individual who always makes the right decision to exercise their functions is carrying out such activities in accordance with virtue. Nonetheless, if this individual does not have fundamental external goods, then they will be unhappy. Thus, it is important to question whether a person who has all available external goods but spends their whole life sleeping could be considered happy. If the response is yes, it is important to carefully consider Aristotle’s

claim (1176a 34-1176b) [1] that individuals who spend their whole day in bed doing nothing can be considered happy]. Happiness, on the other hand, is a behaviour that accompanies virtue (for example, the highest good), which people seek out for its own sake. This means that pleasure cannot be realised in a life that is static and devoid of motion; rather, it can only be realised in individuals who are “living” and “doing” well.

3. Happiness: Common Well-Being

After talking about the details of happiness, this essay will proceed to the main topic, namely whether Aristotle’s theory of human beings’ interactions with the outside world is based on elements of self-interest or altruism.

As previously mentioned, the pursuit of happiness in a social sense is closely related to the actions underpinning ethical principles that reflect the relationship between persons and the world around them. Aristotle clarifies this relationship by introducing the idea of “friendship [philia],” an argument that takes into account the other concern in great detail. In other words, each person’s happiness encompasses the accomplishment of their own goals and interests as well as more general factors involving other stakeholders. Butler [5] states that happiness involves establishing a benign balance between these two factors and compassion toward others. This is critical in realising a multiplicity of particular feelings, desires, and objects (including love for neighbours). Nonetheless, other observers think that Aristotle’s theory of happiness is flawed because it is self-interested, which means that it always promotes one’s own interests and ignores the harm that self-interests can cause [6]. Other academics, however, contend that there are no set criteria for determining how much one’s happiness is affected by the interests of others. Thus, accusing this theory of being purely self-interested is unfair [7]. The present section takes into account these concerns and makes the case that the goals, contents, and outcomes of people’s actions are related to others, even though Aristotle’s opinion indicates that people act out of self-interest. Thus, it will be argued that Aristotle supported a true other concern. In turn, this means that his theory genuinely incorporates both self-interest and other concerns.

As most other relevant theories are based on the motive of love or concern for individuals as ends in themselves, some researchers and philosophers criticise Aristotle’s definition of happiness for being too self-interested. According to Aristotle (1166a2-3) [1], a person’s attitude to oneself defines how they should be characterised in relation to other people. Moreover, he stressed that friends are people for whom individuals do good deeds and in return ask for reciprocated good deeds. In turn, this ensures that the relationship is equal and mutual. We wish our friends good health and well-being and this is due to our desire to spend time with them. In turn, we share their joys and pains. We also tend to make the same decisions as them. Although we do show our friends our sincerity and concern, these wishes appear to be based solely on our need for friendship (according to Aristotle). We automatically associate these concepts with things to our own feelings and actions. Aristotle argues that friendship shows an extending of one’s relationship with oneself to include others (1157b 31; 1158b 1; 1166a 30-31; 1170a 5-10) [1]. Thus, it could be argued that Aristotle’s theory focuses too heavily on how our relationships with others reflect our own demands and self-love, making it inherently selfish.

On the other hand, it is important to note that individuals’ actions and attitudes are limited for a number of reasons and this can even generate different outcomes. People cannot label something as self-interested just because the project was designed to fulfill one’s own needs. It is extremely rare that either an altruistic act or a genuine relationship would be motivated by a pure concern for others’ interests [8]. David Hume [9] opines that claiming that other people’s motives and intentions are often unconsciously hidden or combined with other thoughts pertaining to ourselves is unfair [9]. This even applies to cases such as when people help strangers who fall over in the street, as it is fair to state that they may be thinking about similar experiences that they have had themselves. Thus, when people

are asked why they do this or why they care about others, they often specify more than one answer. In line with this, it stands to reason that some reasoning is associated with the agent itself. On the other hand, some people contend that parental love (which is often thought of as the most selfless type of love) actually involves the parents' own self-interest. Their sacrifice is motivated by the extraordinary bond that exists between them and their children. They yearn for their kids to achieve great things in the future out of the deepest love, but they also do so because they see them as extensions of themselves. In this case, the child emerges as a second self, in which they invest their own hopes and dreams (1161b 30) [1]. How can we expect a totally selfless relationship with others with whom we are less intimate, even if people inevitably include self-regarding interests and psychological projections in this so-called selfless love? If such a relationship exists, it must go against every creature's inborn tendency to prioritise the self over others.

Once again, Aristotle did not use the terms "love of money" or "love of bodily pleasures" to describe the self-love that he spoke of; he failed to view such animal desires as interest realisation. Only the illogical aspect of the human psyche is loved in this way. Nonetheless, Aristotle's concept of love for nous (or the authentic human self) does not imply that individuals should prioritise their own needs. Instead, people have a tendency to see other people as extensions of themselves, meaning that they understand others in the same way that they understand themselves and thus react in a similar way. Concern for others is motivated by a person's desire to do what is best for them personally. People detest being made fun of, for instance, and this is especially true when it is unfair. We may instantly understand and empathise with the suffering of a person who is being mocked if we take their position and feelings into consideration as our own. As a result, when we get along with people, we attempt to avoid this behaviour. Although self-concern is the beginning point, we may extend our feelings to others and care about their well-being in addition to our own. Thanks to this psychological endeavour, our capacity for caring about others is equal to that of self-concern. However, this does not negatively impact the genuineness of our actions, while the results and content are legitimate humanitarian concerns [6].

However, if all individuals were solely self-centred, society would break down into ruthless rivalry. Humans are mortal, meaning that have a limited amount of time and energy and this is an unavoidable fact. The selfish side of humanity would exponentially increase if self-love were advocated as the foundation for how people should approach their relationships with others. Those who have succumbed to this way of life will make every effort to amass as many resources and materials in order as necessary to satisfy their desires during their lives. For instance, in a dystopian future wasteland, individuals can kill others without remorse if it means their own lives will be extended, particularly if this is the only way means to acquire the materials that they need to survive. Aristotle's assertions are in opposition to the facts if they do not go against human nature, since the more time and money that are devoted to one particular area, the less attention that will be given to another [5]. On the other hand, it is the real self-loving agent who loves and gratifies one's soul (i.e., the nous) by the noblest virtue (1168b2 7-33) [1]. This competition is not a typical instance of competing for a scarce good or a case of "if you receive more, I will receive less". Rather, when competition is virtuous, a person does not receive something at the expense of another, but rather both sides receive the greatest good. In such cases, virtue is an inexhaustible good. There is no conflict of interest between the self-loving agent, meaning that the situation ultimately generates effective cooperation and produces a better self [7]. Thus, there is no element of self-interest in the content or results of self-love. Similarly, Aristotle's theory of happiness cannot be considered to be radically self-concerned.

The fact that all the outcomes of people's concern for others are linked back to the originating actor is another reason why some commentators have accused Aristotle's philosophy of being self-concerned. In this respect, people serve merely as tools for realising an individual's goals. Aristotle

(1169b 19) [1] explained that because people are social creatures, they must share their life with others and are even obligated to do so by nature. If not, a lonely person's life will be challenging, especially if they want to continue their activity (1170 5-6) [1].

This is a result of others' services for self-knowledge. In turn, analyzing these 'others' can help people better understand their own personalities. It is only possible for individuals to engage in self-reflection based on others, and this enables them to make an unbiased appraisal [7]. At the same time, other individuals provide a level of closeness that gives people a sense of company and companionship. People can share things with others and engage in activities more consistently when they feel this way. The instrumental value of others is what individuals actually care about, according to Aristotle's theory. Many commentators would argue that this only represents a self-interested conception, in which individuals keep others in their sphere so that they can provide help and comfort, as well as promote their own interests. In this way, benevolence is not involved in this theory.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that sociality is at the heart of human nature. Moreover, this defines the function of others in relation to oneself. When others offer to help us, we often provide the same help to them when they need it. This is a critical value shared by most human beings. The attempt to distinguish self-interest here is nonsensical. For instance, most individuals are more than happy to listen to their friends when they confide secrets in them or ask for guidance. In this case, what friends do is actually a very reflective and self-discovering process, and the listener provides that assistance. Every typical listener gives their time and effort at this precise moment not because they believe they must receive the same in return from the teller for one day, but rather because they genuinely care about their friend's happiness. They thus hope that their advice can alleviate the concerns of their friend. Even licensed therapists engage in this practice; a part of their end must be directed purely towards the teller's happiness, as in our complicated humanity, general benevolence and tender empathy have already been transfused in our manners and sentiments. Thus, goodness and soft empathy (factors that have already been transmitted into our manners and sentiments) must exist in our intricate humanity [9]. Aristotle stressed the importance of human sociality and for this reason, it is unfair to accuse his philosophy of being radically self-centred, even if it is true that people regularly help others out of self-interest. The activities carried out for purposes of self-interest still contain various other-regarding components due to the mutual demand between the self and others.

The authentic other-concerned relationship that Aristotle emphasises must be built by two morally-orientated individuals with similar virtues. This is the most enjoyable and enduring component since both parties desperately want the other person to be 'well' in the fullest sense of the word. When both people share this trait, it will be demonstrated through virtue. (1156b 6-10) [1]. Meanwhile, the other concern is for the instrumental benefit of others. This is either focused on whose love is most useful in caring for the other and who can produce the most significant mutual profits. On the other hand, it can also be determined by whose love is based on the pleasurable care of others in order to achieve mutual amusement. Each person's care is based on the level of utility or pleasure that the other person provides. Additionally, it is human nature to change and thus such relationships are unstable, meaning that they are prone to quick breakdowns. As soon as one of the partners stops being valuable or fascinating, the connection ends (1156a 10-15) [1]. Nevertheless, Aristotle believed that virtuous individuals would be able to see the inherent worth of others and thus develop long-lasting care for their well-being. As a species, humans genuinely hope they can play a role in helping others to experience a warm and happy life, even though others are extremely useful and important in enabling and strengthening our self-knowledge and subsequent actions [7]. Therefore, even though self-interest does play a role in developing interpersonal relationships, Aristotle's advocacy has true other-related outcomes.

However, such considerate assistance and care do not allude to genuine other-concern in which people strive for nobility. Aristotle (1169a 25-35) [1] asserts that decent individuals will forfeit wealth

for the benefit of their friends and will give up time and effort for friends or even their lives for their country. This argument emphasises that such actions are taken with the hope of achieving assistance and laudable nobility through making such sacrifices. Moreover, even if others benefit from these sacrifices, virtuous individuals would keep the greatest good to themselves. The actual good for oneself is not wealth and pleasure, but rather the nobility in one's mind. It is for this reason that Aristotle thought it was wise to strive to achieve the most nobility in an apparent selfish manner [5]. People should ensure that they always keep a greater portion of nobility for themselves whenever it is merited. Thus, if they treat other people nicely, then they will undoubtedly gain moral advantages (1169b 16) [1]. Such assistance and care are not given out of real concern, but rather to get the nobility they can. However, people strive to be more virtuous as a result of their pursuit of nobility. They can only continue to be friends with others in this way; otherwise, there is a significant difference between people in virtue or in many other areas. They are unable to communicate with one another as a result (1158n 32-33) [1]. Although actors' actions are motivated by self-interest, this is not their primary or immediate goal. They also only seek to assist others when those others are in need; when they choose to make self-sacrificing decisions, their actions serve to express their love for themselves and others. Importantly, such actions are undertaken with consideration for both the self and the other. What's more, the accomplishment of virtue represents signifies the other end of their action [7].

It is true that Aristotle highlights the fact that things can be desired simply for their own sake in his discussion pertaining to the struggle between the self and others. In essence, a friend is the biggest external benefit that happiness requires, and thus individuals can care about others' happiness whilst also seeking out their own (1169b 10) [1]. However, if an individual wants something for other reasons, then it is not the thing itself that is good (1096b 19) [1]. Therefore, it is not the outcome that people care about. Rather, people actually care about whether others can serve as tools to fulfil their own happiness.

On the other hand, human beings relate to others through interplay and interactions. When the welfare of others becomes a key part of our own happiness, our well-being becomes part of theirs. In other words, so long as individuals continue to be good people, they will continue to develop and evolve. When we treat others as extensions of ourselves, we influence them through our actions, voice and thoughts. In turn, both we and they start to resemble each other over time. In essence, we mould them and they mould us [10]. This is crucial because it helps both parties grow. Therefore, the self-centred drive and the other-centred outcomes and objectives (both of which highlight the distinctive characteristics of humanity) are included in Aristotle's hypothesized relationship between oneself and others. Aiming for the inherent good is a positive thing given that something naturally beneficial can be broadly categorised as being good. In Aristotle's diagram, self-interest is represented by a love of the nous, the supreme and most divine aspect of the self. It also stands for the desire for nobility and the highest virtue. The love of the other as other is known as "other-concern," and it occurs when an action is performed for its own sake. As a result, both the self-interested and the other-concerned aspects of this sketch can be seen as virtues but not vices. Moreover, the criticisms of Aristotle's theory as being too self-interested in both incorrect and unjustifiable in view of these factors.

4. Conclusion

The Happiness Theory presented in this essay has focused primarily on Aristotle's explanation of why happiness is the ultimate goal of human existence. Moreover, the happy existence that people should aspire to achieve has been examined, whilst various criticisms of the theory have been highlighted. The essay also outlined the different types of activities that fall under the category of happiness.

Despite the fact that some writers have criticised the virtuous happiness theory for its severe selfishness and lack of regard for others' welfare, it is crucial to remember that human behaviours do not always have a clearly defined regard for others. There will inevitably be some consideration of the person themselves. This can be categorised as a type of other care as long as people do not further their own interests by hurting others and their concern for others is for their own sake rather than receiving pleasure or rewards. Concern for others helps people find more satisfaction within themselves. Therefore, it is reasonable to state that Aristotle's philosophy takes into account both self-interest and other-concern.

This theory advocates for people exhibiting their best behaviours, regardless of whether this is accomplished through rational human faculty or the fulfilling of one's social role. Aristotle pointed out that humans have an instinctual concern for themselves, as well as an intuitive inclination towards achieving happiness and thus his theory teaches people to be tolerant of this human trait, as well encouraging them to restrain such feelings. This makes Aristotle's theory extremely practical for the immediate exercising of activities and not a mere vacant form of theorizing.

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